

A CALL TO OPENNESS AND TRUST

This document is offered as a Call to Openness and Trust. It comes from some clergy and lay members of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, meeting in St. Louis, Mo. and adopting this Call to Openness and Trust January 31, 1970. It bears no claim to finality or completeness, but only asks to be one part of the continuing Christian dialog by which the Spirit builds. We invite additional statements, even as we hope to continue to speak the truth in love.

We would like to point out several basic thrusts for meaningful dialog among Christian brethren.

1. Discipleship is above "membership"
2. The church as institution needs to be a servant, not the master of God's people.
3. Our relationship in Christ is more important than institutional relationship.
4. Those who would use structures for legalistic ends are enemies of the Gospel.
5. Justification by faith demands diversity in unity.

By its very nature, dialog gropes for understanding with halting phrases, but, through the process, the Holy Spirit works in brethren to strengthen and enrich one another. This document is not even a personal confession of faith for all who subscribe to it, but an appeal for an attitude we think is needed in the Church in our time.

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Jesus Christ is Lord. With joy we join ourselves to this primary loyalty of believers of many ages. We reaffirm that early Christian testimony because it seems necessary to ask basic questions and to answer them clearly and concisely once again.

We identify too with the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church, understood, as all such statements must be, in the historical setting and terms of their time. We see these confessional statements as setting forth a life of Christian freedom in the Gospel.

I. Face the Crisis of Values

Because we live in a time when all of society's patterns are being reexamined or reshaped, severe danger exists that the values we want to affirm will be lost. We desire, therefore, to affirm in this document and to experience in our time the kind of life in God's mission to which we believe Christ calls us. We want to express our convictions and hopes in terms that have meaning for our time and place.

Under the authority of Holy Scriptures, as were the framers of the creeds and confessions, we today must determine what values we want to establish and preserve. It seems that we are now at a crisis-point in our society when new patterns can really be set up and shaped. Even those patterns will be tentative, though the values themselves, where rightly discerned, are enduring.

The crisis of change generally present in the world is acute in the church also. In our church, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, crisis shows itself in tensions evident in attitudes and life-styles.

II. Welcome the New Day

In this day of tension and change we are stimulated to new realization that the Christian church is one. We affirm that now is the time for openness and trust among brothers and sisters in Christ so that new structures and patterns may be shaped.

We welcome the opportunities of the new day. We recognize that movements among the young, the blacks, and the poor have caused many in the church to become sensitive to new directions. These movements, together with scientific and technological discoveries, have given us a new context for Christian action.

We affirm that God can be seen at work in what is happening in our time, and we desire to celebrate His presence and power in the vast changes we witness. But we also experience the demonic, which intrudes into God's world and shows itself in a confusion about values.

III. Seek Openness in the Gospel

We hold that the honesty of individual faith and the integrity of group covenants must be protected and encouraged. It is important to enter the 1970s with renewed awareness that political organization in the church is not of primary concern. Neither might nor power but God's Spirit decides the destiny of people. The church lives in this awareness.

Our primary concern is that our spirit corresponds to God's Spirit. With that in mind, forces intent on renewal or reformation in the church ought to set forth a life-style consistent with the Gospel, the core of Christian uniqueness. It becomes important to raise a banner of convictions with which others may identify. Openness and trust flow out of life in the Gospel and are an essential result of it.

IV. Raise a Banner

It is with the intention of raising such a banner that we attempt now to set forth some of the convictions that control us. We address ourselves to our time and place. We do not pretend to offer a comprehensive or final statement of Christian faith and life but seek only to be a part of the continuing Christian dialog by which brothers and sisters encourage one another.

The issues we point to are not new. They have always been a part of Christian faith and life. The Mission Affirmations adopted by our Synod in convention in 1965 offer us help in shaping new attitudes and actions.

In our church body all of us, nevertheless, at times seem preoccupied with our own institutional power, property, projects, and propositions rather than with giving birth to a Christian way of life which frees men to be and to do as the Spirit guides them. We tend to make judgmental rules out of propositional theological statements rather than using such statements to free people. God makes men free to follow diversity in understanding Scriptures because Jesus Christ is held as Lord and Savior.

V. Choose Freedom

We speak for freedom: diversity in unity. We recognize and accept the relationship established between God and man by Jesus Christ, rejoice in our relationship to all men through Him, and hold that the unity in which we live is based on our relationship in Christ and not on rules and principles. We do not desire to be understood as judging the reality of anyone's spiritual life, so long as he holds to Christ as Savior and Lord.

We value the new humanity given us in Christ and see its best instance to be in the incarnation of our Lord Himself. It is to be expected that also as Christians some people will choose to give a higher priority and stronger adherence to some values rather than others in expressing their relationship to Jesus Christ.

We recognize that like-minded people may prefer to structure themselves together. They have this right as long as they do not use it to draw lines which rate people spiritually or bind the consciences of others to their preferences. We see a benefit for the whole church when diversity is shared rationally and openly, and the Spirit's guidance is sought. When ever those who are like-minded group themselves, they should be careful not to break fellowship with those who love and serve Christ as Savior and Lord in other patterns.

In our time of increasing polarization it seems important to recognize that many of the structures, patterns, and assertions of the past cannot be shored up or maintained any longer. Nor can the past be retrieved in some idealistic way. Rather we must renew or realign ourselves into new patterns in which respect for one another is nourished.

We favor an attitude of openness and trust among brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, rather than an attitude which seeks to mold everyone into the same pattern and control them by detailed rules. We see alternative attitudes, when freely chosen, as a conflict in life-styles rather than as a denial of Jesus Christ. Persons with differing attitudes are brothers and sisters in Christ so long as their hope and power is in Him.

VI. Assert Convictions

Now is not the time to be silent for the sake of unwise compromise and uneasy harmony. Now is the time to assert our convictions so that we may hold fast the peace of the Gospel.

1. We recognize that rules and regulations which identify brothers in Christ organizationally are legitimate and useful insofar as they help people. Whether they serve these purposes will always be subject to fallible human judgment; we hold that such identifications exist by human ordinances only. This we interpret to mean that common consent or the will of the majority, charitably exercised, decides which patterns shall be maintained in a given group.

We question whether we should as a matter of conscience, remain separated from those who share with us a common faith in God based on His action and revelation in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. When Christians desire to express their unity in worship, witness, or work, denominational identification should not be used to bind consciences.

2. We believe that faith in God is expressed by the quality of our relationships to people even more than by formulating precise doctrines about God and man. We resist the temper in our own church body which would hold men to complete agreement in formal and informal doctrinal propositions or would make the doctrines rather than God Himself the object of faith. At the same time we by no means reject formulations by which any individual or group seeks to express for itself a conviction by which that person or group is prepared to live. Therefore we see an urgent need for Christian education to use the Scripture, creeds, and doctrinal propositions to help each Christian develop his own theology and life-style.

3. We believe that people have priority over organizational structures. Therefore those who exercise authority in the church must honor the Christian's freedom to speak, write, or act according to his convictions concerning Christ, the Scriptures, his fellowship with his community, or any other aspect of Christian faith and life. When these conditions do not exist, people are manipulated, they play roles, they make compromises, and they become phony.

4. We affirm that people see God today also in human relationships. Therefore social and political action is of significant importance. We see the action of the church directed toward the whole man and all his needs. We assert that every action that helps people is God-pleasing. We hold that the church as well as the individual may act for principles of justice, peace, social order, and human welfare.

5. The Gospel (that is, Christ), not a doctrine which equates the Gospel with the Bible, is the basis for the unity of the family of God. We specifically hold that differences concerning: (1) the manner of the creation of the universe by God, (2) the authorship and literary form of any books of the Bible, (3) the definition of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, (4) the moral obligation of Christians in individual or corporate action, (5) the question of factual error in the Bible, and (6) the role and authority of clergy in the church, are not to be the basis for inclusion or exclusion of people among the true disciples of Jesus Christ or for membership in the LCMS.*

Note * Since VI, 5 has raised many inquiries, we remind readers that this paragraph is not a "confessional" statement. We feel that the items mentioned should not divide the Christian fellowship.

VII. In Conclusion

Finally, let it be known that the call we issue does not come from any malicious intent to harm the LCMS but only to state freely and clearly what it means to follow Christ in our time. We desire to form no new church body but only to increase freedom and responsibility in the church in which our Lord has placed us. To that end we ask only that our conscience not be bound, except by God, and that our freedom to speak, write and act not be arbitrarily curtailed. We declare that we are prepared to live by our convictions and invite those who share them to respond to this call for openness and trust.

Suggested Reading

Paul's Letters to the Galatians, and to the Ephesians
Walther's "Altenburg Theses"
(see the Lutheran Encyclopedia)
"A Statement" group, Chicago 1945
"Speaking the Truth in Love."
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, 1965
Conv. Proc. "The Mission Affirmations"

Those desiring additional copies, or to communicate their concern or support, may do so by writing,

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